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Stefanie Carreiro

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# Gender Differences and Perspectives on Elderly Care in China

STEFANIE CARREIRO



Stefanie Carreiro is a senior in the Social Work Department at BSU. She conducted her research in the summer of 2011 with funding from the Shea Scholarship and BSU's Division of External Affairs. Under the mentorship of Dr. Jing Tan she spent three weeks at Shanghai Normal University in China researching aging populations. Her work was accepted for presentation at the 2012 National Conference of Undergraduate Research in Ogden, Utah. Upon graduation in May of 2012 Stefanie plans to attend Smith College and complete her Master's degree in Social Work.

**C**hina not only has the largest population in the world but also the fastest population aging rate. The one-child policy was created in 1979 as a means to control the dramatic growth in China's population (Hesketh, Lu & Xing, 2005). The first generation of children born into the one-child policy is coming to the age where they will need to consider how they are going to care for their parents. Often these individuals have the challenge of caring for four grandparents, a child as well as themselves and a husband or wife, otherwise known as the 4:2:1 phenomenon (Hasketh et al., 2005). Furthermore, the availability of family members to provide care is expected to decrease due to the rapid growth of China's aging population, the one-child policy and the fact that the average person's life expectancy has increased over the past couple of decades (Harbaugh & West, 1993).

## What Is Filial Piety (Xiao)?

Filial piety, one of the most important aspects of Chinese culture, comes from Confucian philosophy. Filial piety is a core ethical value that "implies a set of behaviors and attitudes that indicate feelings of love, respect and care towards one's parents" (p. 283). Filial piety comes with a strong feeling of obligation to care for older adults (Laidlaw, Wang, Coelho & Power, 2010). Sung (1995, 1998) was able to identify six dimensions to filial piety: showing respect, fulfilling responsibility, harmonizing family, making repayments, showing affection and making sacrifice.

According to Tsai, Chen and Tsai (2008), filial piety is the root of all morals and social values in East Asia and has played a part in influencing the care between children and parents. Filial piety focuses on the belief that care for older adults is the responsibility of the adult children in the family, therefore making elder care a family issue not a governmental issue (Lam, 2002). Similar to this idea, traditional filial piety points out the importance of guiding children towards offering proper love and respect to their parents and elders as a form of gratitude for raising them; in return the children gain social acceptance from their relatives and peers (Chang & Schneider, 2010). At the same time there are expectations for older adults living with their children; it is understood that they are to help care for their grandchildren (Tan et al., 2004). Although some believe that filial piety teaches obedience to older generations and care for older adults, it is more largely considered "a multi-dimensional concept among Chinese people, that has traditional ties

with Confucianism, thus providing the traditional basis for the ideals of respect for others” (Laidlaw et al., 2010, pp 283).

### **Gendered Expectations of Filial Piety**

Historically in China, a higher value has been placed on men than women; it begins with the idea that the father was responsible for showing care and love to the son when he is young, so that as the son gets older he will reciprocate these feelings. The Chinese culture also placed an even higher value on first born sons; it is thought that not only would they gain the power and prestige that comes along with being male, but they would also be favored economically and legally by being entitled to all wealth and property his parents had (Chappell & Kusch, 2006). It was drastically different for women during these times. Confucian philosophy dictated that women were to be restricted to the home and they were not afforded the same luxuries that men were. Women needed to follow the three obediences: obey the father before marriage, the husband after marriage, and the son in widowhood (Tan et al., 2004).

China’s patriarchal system, responsible for placing a high value on sons and viewing daughters as goods of lost value, is also accountable for putting the responsibility of taking care of older adults on sons and daughter-in-laws. Historically, daughters were not responsible for helping with the care of their parents; instead, after marriage they were required to provide assistance in caring for their husband’s parents, that is, parents-in-law. It is the daughters-in-law responsibility to assist with the domestic responsibilities such as personal care and emotional support while the son provides financially. Despite the idea that ultimately the responsibility for the care of older adults falls to the eldest son, Chinese culture has a strong belief that it is the responsibility of the entire family to care for older adults (Chappell & Kusch, 2006).

However, this idea has been changing over time. Neal and Ingersoll (1997) found that daughters were more apt to devote time to their older parents and be primary caregivers than sons. Zhan and Montgomery (2003) found that there was, in fact, a shift happening within the families, the responsibility of elder care was slowly being transferred from the sons to the daughters. Yu, Shilong, Zehuai & Lie (2000) found that in some areas of China the amount of sons that are involved with the care of the parents is very similar to the amount of daughters, 18.7% and 17.7% respectively. The increased involvement of daughters, as well as the decreased involvement for daughters-in-law in the care of older adults, supports the idea that filial piety, and the beliefs that go along with it, are changing (Chappell & Kusch, 2006).

### **How Is Modernization Impacting Care for Older Adults?**

According to the Chinese culture, placing a parent in a nursing home goes against the traditional belief of filial piety that states a child should reciprocate love and care by taking care of parents when they are old. Those who do not take care of their parents in old age face ridicule from family and neighbors because they are seen as “violators of the traditional virtue” (Chang & Schneider, 2010). However, with modernization, an evolving society and the one-child policy, views of filial piety in relation to elder care have changed with some families now viewing long-term care as a way of demonstrating filial piety (Chang & Schneider, 2010).

According to Chappell and Kusch (2006), the state has begun to view filial piety as a virtue that will help with the eldercare crisis. It is believed that because the state lacks adequate welfare and public services, the responsibility of care for elders is now placed on their adult children, daughters in particular. However, Chen (2011) states that modernization has forced the traditional views of filial piety to be socially reconstructed. Chen (2011) goes on to say the idea that adult children are responsible for the care of their elders is becoming less viable because of the vast increases in economic development, greater access to education and job mobility for young adults. This is especially the case for females because they have not always had access to secondary education and job opportunities outside of the home.

Increased opportunity for higher education is one of the main reasons why filial piety has less of an influence in how children care for their elders. With the one-child policy, parents are now more willing to invest in their only child’s education, whether the child be male or female (Laidlaw et al., 2010). With increased educational and job opportunities comes the fundamental idea that these new opportunities will promote individuality and self-determination (Levande, Hernick, & Sung, 2000). This can have a direct effect on the way that children view filial piety and ultimately the way that they plan to care for their parents in old age (Lam, 2002).

### **Purpose of the Research**

As a result of the increasing population of older adults in combination with the one-child policy, the ability to care for older adults is becoming an issue for people in China. Children are struggling with balancing their filial duties along with the new educational and job opportunities being presented to them. This leaves the care for older adults in question and, as a result, there is a need for care in other capacities, whether it is institutional care or in-home providers.

The aim of this exploratory research study was to further the

knowledge of social workers and to better understand Chinese college students' perspectives on elderly care. With this being the first cohort from the one-child policy attending college, social workers, as well as other professionals in related fields, need to understand how modernization and an evolving society are going to impact a child's ability to care for their elderly parents in the future.

It became apparent through the literature review that a limited amount of research has been completed on the current generation of college students and their perspectives on elderly care. They are the first generation of the one-child policy, and thus, provide a unique opportunity to understand how these individuals plan to take care of their parents when they become elderly. The research seems to be showing that traditional gender roles are changing and women are taking on an increased role in caring for their parents. However, we do not know for sure if this is in fact the case. Therefore, the research question I propose to answer is: What are the gender differences in perspectives on elderly care among college students in China?

## METHODOLOGY

### Methods for Data Collection

Participants were obtained through the use of non-probability sampling methods. Participants were recruited at Shanghai Normal University over the course of three weeks through the use of availability sampling. Quantitative data was collected through the distribution of anonymous self-administered survey questionnaires to 380 college students (117 males and 263 females, ranging in age from 18-36 years). The survey included demographic information and questions assessing college students' attitudes towards older adults using the Aging Semantic Differential (ASD). The final portion of the questionnaire focused on students' perspectives on elderly care.

### "Perspective on elderly care"

The main focus of this research was to determine whether or not there is a difference in the way male and female college students view elderly care. "Perspectives on elderly care" was operationalized into five categories: looking after their elderly parents, offering financial assistance, retaining contact with their parents, living with their elderly parents and institutional care. Seventeen of the questions required participants to select a statement that most accurately reflected their feelings related to elderly care. The first two questions assessed perspectives on older adults in general. Each of the five domains of the elderly care practice were asked three separate ways: 1) "I should or I will," 2) "My parents expect" and 3) "I expect." "I should or will" focuses on the student's own choice. "My parents expect"

pertains to what the students believe their parents think and "I expect" concerns what the students will expect from their children in the future. A six point Likert scale was used with one representing strongly disagree and six strongly agree.

### Data Analysis

Upon completion of the study, the questionnaire data was input into SPSS and analyzed through the use of independent t-tests. A total of 25 t-tests were performed to examine gender difference in perspectives towards elderly care. The first 17 t-tests focused on each question individually, the next five t-tests combined all questions related to each of the five categories of elderly care and the final three t-tests contained all questions related to "I will," "my parents expect" and finally "I expect."

## RESULTS

The results of 25 t-tests were summarized in Table 1.

### Perspectives on Older Adults in general.

The first two questions of the survey were aimed at determining participants' perspectives on elderly care in general, whereas the rest of the survey was specific to their families. The two t-tests were aimed at determining whether there was a gender difference in attitudes towards looking after older adults and respecting older adults. The t-tests revealed that there are no gender differences in looking after and respecting older adults.

### Perspective on looking after or being looked after.

This study was interested in whether there are gender differences among Chinese college students when it came to looking after their elderly parents. Therefore, participants were asked two questions related to looking after their elderly parents and another question related to the expectations they would have for their future children. The first question participants had to answer was whether they believed they should look after their elderly parents. The t-test resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $t = -2.957$ ,  $p = .004$ . Female college students more frequently reported that they felt they should take care of their elderly parents than male students. The final two t-tests determined that gender is not significant when being compared to their parent's expectations and their expectation for their future children, in terms of being looked after by their children. When all questions pertaining to looking after elderly parents were combined, a t-test revealed that there were no significant differences among male and female college students.

### I Will/Should

Questions that focused on what college students felt they should do (i.e. looking after the elderly adults, offering financial assistance, retaining contact with, living together and

**Table 1: Gender Difference in Perspectives on Elderly Care (N=380)**

	Gender				t
	Female (n=263)		Male (n=117)		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<b>Perspectives towards elderly in general</b>					
I do/will look after older adults in general because of their age	5.15	1.04	5.11	1.06	-0.356
I do/will respect older adults in general because of their age	5.15	4.97	4.97	1.21	-1.405
<b>Perspectives on looking after elderly parents</b>					
Look After	15.19	2.15	14.92	2.77	-1.032
When my parent(s) are older adults, I should look after them	5.84	.520	5.56	.971	-2.957*
When my parent(s) are older adults, they will expect to be looked after	4.99	1.02	4.87	1.18	-0.981
I would expect to be looked after when I am an older adult	4.36	1.25	4.49	1.28	0.913
<b>Perspectives on retaining contact with elderly parents</b>					
Retain Contact	17.00	1.58	15.83	2.78	-4.253*
When my parent(s) are older adults, I should retain contact with them	5.83	.569	5.51	.961	-3.365*
When my parent(s) are older adults, they will expect to be retain contacted	5.67	.689	5.33	1.01	-3.326*
I would expect to be retain contacted when I am an older adult	5.50	.806	4.98	1.81	-4.275*
<b>Perspectives on offering financial assistance</b>					
Financial Assistance	13.81	2.54	13.52	2.74	-0.994
When my parent(s) are older adults, I should financially assist them	5.78	.569	5.50	.997	-2.820*
When my parent(s) are older adults, they will expect to be financially assisted	4.16	1.29	4.15	1.26	-0.045
I would expect to be financially assisted when I am an older adult	3.86	1.35	3.85	1.29	-0.062
<b>Perspectives on living together with elderly parents</b>					
Live Together	12.51	3.24	12.89	2.99	1.084
When my parent(s) are older adults, I should live together with them	4.40	1.31	4.41	1.12	0.071
When my parent(s) are older adults, they will expect to live together with me	4.41	1.25	4.49	1.23	0.570
I would expect to live together with my child when I am an older adult	3.71	1.32	3.95	1.39	1.549
<b>Perspectives on institutional care</b>					
Institutional Care	9.37	3.55	9.79	3.55	1.068
I would consider choosing institutional care as the elder care choice for my parent(s)	2.89	1.31	3.18	1.36	1.977*
My parent(s) would consider choosing institutional care as the elder care choice	3.13	1.38	3.09	1.35	-0.212
I would consider choosing institutional care as the elder care choice for myself	3.37	1.51	3.52	1.51	0.922
I will/should	24.75	2.48	24.21	3.62	-1.455
Parents Expects	22.35	3.41	21.94	4.06	-1.022
I Expect	20.80	4.03	20.79	4.22	-0.022

\*p&lt; .05

perspective on institutional care) were combined in order to determine if there was a significant gender difference. The t-test revealed that there were no significant gender differences among what students thought they should do for their elderly parents.

### **Parents Expect:**

Questions that focused on what college students thought their parents expected of them were also combined: the goal of this was to determine if there was a difference of opinion among genders when it came to what they believed their parents' expectations were of them in terms of their care. The t-test revealed that there was no significant difference among the genders and what they believed their parents' expectations were for them in terms of their care.

### **I Expect:**

All questions related to the college students' expectations they would have for their future children were also combined in hopes of determining whether there was a difference of opinion among the genders. The results showed that males and females reported similar expectations for their future children.

### **Perspectives on retaining contact with elderly among college students in China:**

Again the students were asked to answer three questions in relation to retaining contact with their parents. The first question was related to whether the students felt they should retain contact with their elderly parents, the second question asked was whether their parents expected them to retain contact and the final question was whether they would expect their future children to retain contact with them when they become elderly.

The t-test revealed there is a statistically significant gender difference among male and female college students and whether they should retain contact with their parents when they become elderly  $t = -3.365$ ,  $p = .001$ . The t-test also determined that female college students were more likely than male to report that they should retain contact with their parents when they are elderly.

The t-tests also revealed that there was a statistically significant gender difference in terms of how students perceived their parents' expectations for retaining contact when they are elderly  $t = -3.326$ ,  $p = .001$ . Female college students were more likely than male to report that their parents expected them to retain contact with them when they are elderly. The final t-test also yielded significant results; it was determined that there was a significant gender difference when measured against what college students will expect of their future children  $t = -4.275$ ,

$p = .000$ . Female college students were more likely than their male counterparts to report that they expected their children to retain contact with them when they are elderly.

When all questions pertaining to retaining contact were combined, a t-test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between male and female college students and their perspectives on retaining contact with either their elderly parents or their future children  $t = -4.253$ ,  $p = .000$ . The t-test also revealed that female college students were more likely than male to report that they should retain contact with their elderly parents, that their parents expect them to retain contact and that they would also expect their future children to retain contact with them as well.

### **Perspectives on offering financial assistance and receiving financial assistance:**

This study also looked at college students' perspectives toward financial assistance. Students were again asked to answer three questions related to financial assistance: "I should offer financial assistance," "my parents expect financial assistance" and "I will expect financial assistance from my children when I am elderly." For the first question the t-test determined that there was a statistically significant difference between gender and whether the students felt they should offer financial assistance  $t = -2.820$ ,  $p = .005$ ; it was determined that female college students were more likely to think that they should offer financial assistance to their elderly parents than male students. However for the final two questions the t-tests determined that gender is not significant when comparing it to what expectations students believed their parents had of them in terms of financial assistance and what expectation they would have for their future children.

All questions pertaining to financial assistance were also combined (i.e. "I will", "my parents expect" and "I expect"). The t-test showed there was a slight difference between genders but not enough to be significant. However, the test did reveal, that like retaining contact, female college students were more likely than males to report they should provide financial assistance, that their parents expect financial assistance and that they will expect financial assistance from their future children when they themselves are elderly.

### **Perspectives on living with parents and living with children:**

Students were asked three questions in relation to living arrangements: "I should live with my parents," "my parents expect me to live with them" and "I expect to live with my children when I am elderly." The independent t-tests revealed that gender was not a significant indicator in college students' perspective on living with their elderly parents, the parents'

expectations on living arrangements and their expectations for their future children. All three survey questions were combined (i.e. “I will,” “my parents expect” and “I expect”) to see if there was a gender difference in terms of college students’ perspectives on living with their parents and their children. The t-test results showed that there was no statistically significant difference among male and female college students.

### **Perspectives on Institutional Care:**

Students were asked a series of three questions related to institutional care. The first question was whether they would consider institutional care for their parents when they are elderly. The second question asked whether they believed their parents would consider institutional care when they are elderly and the final question asked whether they would consider institutional care for themselves when they are elderly.

There was a statistically significant difference among the genders in terms of whether they would consider institutional care for their parents when they are elderly  $t = 1.977, p = .049$ , male college students were more likely to report that they would consider institutional care for their elderly parents than female. The t-tests for the final two questions revealed that gender was not a significant factor when measuring it against what their parents would consider for themselves and what they expect from their future children in terms of institutional care. When all three questions were combined (i.e. “I will,” “my parents expect” and “I expect”), the t-test revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference between genders.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Discussion**

Although it seems the traditional Chinese belief of Xiao is taking on new meaning and is being socially reconstructed, this study suggests that the older generation continues to have an impact on the current generation especially when it comes to institutional care. The survey results show that both male and female college students were more likely to select “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree” when reporting whether or not they would consider institutional care for their elderly parents. This could be the result of the negative stigma Chinese society still places on the institutionalization of older adults. Another finding from the survey is that male college students were significantly more likely to report that they would consider institutional care for their elderly parents than female students. This could show that gender roles are changing, and that women are taking on a more prominent role in the care of their elderly parents.

On the other hand there are several factors showing that traditional Chinese beliefs are changing as a result of

modernization. For example, the traditional concept that parents should live with their older children is one of them. The students reported that it is not necessary for elderly parents and children to live with each other; rather they believe it is more important to live near one another in case the elderly parent needs assistance. Interestingly enough, the research did not reveal significant gender differences in terms of living with parents. This also suggests that the traditional gender roles are changing. Women are no longer being repressed by society or their male family members. They are encouraged to seek higher education to improve their future opportunities.

The most important finding from this study surrounded retaining contact with elderly parents. The survey revealed that all questions related to retaining contact had significant gender differences, in each case female students were more apt to report that they should retain contact, that their parents expect to retain contact and they would expect their future children to retain contact. This could be related to the fact that even though gender roles are beginning to change women are still more likely in most cultures to take responsibility for their elderly parents. However, this has not always been the case for women in the Chinese culture; in fact, traditionally women held little responsibility in caring for their elderly parents.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This was one of the first studies designed to look at Chinese college students’ perspectives towards elderly care. By completing an exploratory research study, we are not only bringing increased knowledge and awareness to an important topic that is under researched, but we are also providing valuable information to gerontological educators, service providers, and policy makers. The first limitation of the research was due to the disproportion of female to male participants. Another limitation is that a non-probability sample was used, so the results cannot be applied to the entire population. Finally, the portion of the survey that focuses on “perspectives on elderly care” has not been standardized. Additional research is needed to determine if this measure is reliable and valid.

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